ELAM DAVIES MEMORIAL SERVICE

JUNE 26, 2003

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR

FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Grace be with you and peace, from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

On behalf of my colleague Joanna Adams and myself I welcome you to this service of worship — *The Book of Common Worship* calls it a Service of Witness to the Resurrection, and that is most certainly what it is — a celebration of the very heart of our faith — that in Jesus Christ God has overcome death.

It is also a celebration of the life of Elam Davies, Presbyterian Minister, Pastor, Teacher, Counselor, Leader, Friend, Husband, Father, Grandfather, a remarkable life that touched the lives of thousands and thousands of individuals over the years.

The Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* also says that:

> “When death occurs — the pastor and officers of the congregation — and the members — should be informed as soon as possible so that they might provide appropriate consolation and support to the family and friends.”

That, too is why we are here.  Because Elam Davies was the pastor of this congregation and because Grace and Judith and Gwendolyn were part of this community of faith  loved and admired, and because Grace and Elam continued to be very much a part of the life of the congregation of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago and because Grace is and will always be — a precious part of this family.

I have received messages from people who cannot be here — but wanted to be remembered.  Arlene Faulk — a good friend who expressed gratitude for Elam's ministry in her life.

And The Reverend Thomas Tewell, pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church of New York City.

Tom wrote:

Joanna Adams and I are pleased as well to welcome former church, staff persons who have returned to Chicago to be here today and who had the privilege of working with Elam Davies, along with the current staff.

Elam chose many of the scripture passages and hymns we will be using today.  Morgan Simmons who was invited by Elam to be the Organist Choirmaster at Fourth Presbyterian Church and who worked closely with Elam over the years helped with the selection of music.

And Clyde Bowles, current Clerk of Session and close friend of Elam's will participate in the service by reading the Psalter selection.

In the materials Elam had assembled for whomever one day would plan his memorial was this — attributed to St. Francis.  It touched me deeply when I read it and I shared it with the congregation on Sunday.

> “All my life Thou hast been at the Helm though very secretly.”

Let us worship God.

Remarks:

How do you follow a legend? When I was invited to come to Chicago in 1985 Elam Davies was as much of a legend as preachers ever get to be. And in the narrow world inhabited by preachers a fundamental bit of wisdom is —in answer to the question “How do you follow a legend — don’t even try.” The conventional wisdom in the narrow world of preachers is that if you are invited to follow a legend, be prepared for a short and stormy ministry, an interim, we call it. That did not happen at Fourth Presbyterian Church in 1985 because of Elam Davies. He knew the conventional wisdom. And he loved this church so very much and he was so very gracious and kind when it came to the subject of his successor that he was determined that the transition would be smooth and

successful and that the mission of the great church he had helped to build would not be interrupted or impaired.  It was his gift to me — for which I had the privilege of thanking him and for which I continue to be profoundly grateful.

He and Grace invited us to their apartment for tea on the first weekend we were in Chicago, to meet the staff and officers.  David Skinner was with us.  It was, of course, consummately gracious and pleasant. Midway through Elam suggested that Sue might like to see the apartment and as they left the room Elam announced the ground rules.  He had told the congregation in no uncertain terms that when he returned he would do no baptisms, weddings, funerals, pastoral calls — and that he and Grace would not come back to Fourth Presbyterian Church

for five years.  Frankly, it seemed excessive even to me but he brushed aside my suggestion that maybe five years was a little long and that I'd be happy to have him share in weddings and baptisms.  Many of you know far better than I that trying to get Elam Davies to change his mind was like trying to shove a block of granite down Michigan Avenue.  He wasn't going to do it.  He had thought about it.  He had watched a friend retire and return to his old church and take up a post in the Narthex opposite the new minister, his successor, and greet the members of the congregation after worship on Sunday.  There would be none of that. That was it.  He kept his word.  Long after he didn't have to, he kept his word.  As he created a remarkable congregation — he created a space for his successor.

He offered friendship, advice if I wanted it and asked — which I did; we visited, had lunch — it was perfect.  And on or about the fifth anniversary of his retirement he and Grace returned and were in their pew every Sunday morning and without fail, Elam, made his way to the chancel after worship to greet me — and knowing the vulnerability of the preacher at that particular moment, always, without fail — said something thoughtful — positive about the service.

We continued to talk over the years and he was always interested, supportive, eager to know what was happening in Chicago.  His ministry in retirement was important in ways invisible to almost everybody but me and I am deeply grateful.

You have heard more about him than he would be comfortable with our hearing. Let me add just a few thoughts.

The Fourth Presbyterian Church is a strong, faithful and growing congregation because Elam Davies understood something about the very nature of the church — when almost nobody else did. Elam understood that the business of the church is mission: that the church is created by Jesus Christ and called by Jesus Christ to be his body in the world, and commissioned by Jesus Christ to do nothing less than transform the world. So Elam Davies, when churches like this one were recoiling in horror and the excesses of the cultural revolution of the 60's and 70's, locking their doors, building chain link fences around their parking lots, selling out and moving to the safety of the suburbs. Elam

Davies led this church in the opposite direction and created an ecclesiastical revolution, a miracle here, a church that learned to open its doors, and make itself valuable, and welcome those often shut out in this world. It was infectious. It was faithful. It was like Jesus — the body of Christ. And it is why Fourth Presbyterian Church is strong and vital and growing today.

And the other thing I want to say is Thanks be to God for the theological foundation upon which Elam's preaching and his entire ministry — and to the degree that we can ever know a person's heart his personal faith rested. God's grace. God's "preeminent grace" Augustine put it in the 4th Century. God's grace that comes first — before our religious proclivities, our religious rules, creeds, institutions, God's grace that comes

before our faith, our God consciousness: grace which is part of the ineffable mystery we call God:  the essential part, the essence of God.  God's amazing grace — God's unconditional love.  Elam believed and proclaimed a Gospel as wide and deep as the mystery of God's unconditional love. Grounded in scripture, that majestic and essential scriptural theme as old as the tradition itself:  that the story of God and human beings in relationship is essentially the story of God's grace:  God creating, God interceding, God initiating, God calling, God pursuing — even when human beings are looking other direction — or running away.

> Whither shall I go from the spirit?
> Or wither shall I flee from thy presence?
>
> If I ascend to heaven thou art there!
> If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!
>
> If I take the wings of the morning and dwell on the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall hold me fast.

It was, apparently inconceivable to Elam that God would not eternally love and patiently pursue and parentally care for and nurture every child of God. It was, apparently, unconceivable to Elam that a human being could outrun God's grace, unthinkable to Elam that God would reject, discard, condemn, eternally punish a precious child.

Elam took the Gospel of God's grace seriously. How the world needs that Gospel. At a time of resurgent fundamentalisms among people of faith the world over: at a time when the daily newspaper seems to document Samuel Huntington's thesis that the War of Civilizations is already started: in a time when religion seems far more concerned about excluding the non-believers, the heretical, the infidel. How important it is to hear the other message: the good news of a God of grace: a God who, in Jesus Christ went out of his way to welcome the unwelcome, the marginal, the outcast, the God who Jesus described as a shepherd seeking one lost sheep, a joyful father running down the road to welcome a son home again, a woman overturning the household to find one lost coin.

The world needs to know the counter culture notion of a gracious, merciful God who in Jesus Christ so identified with the lost, and the least as to die like one of them.

Karl Barth once said that we do not like to hear that we are saved by grace:  that God does not owe us something:  that our salvation is a gift.

Elam Davies knew that truth in the very depth of his being:  he preached it:  he led a church to express it in the world:  he lived it and died in the blessed truth of God’s unconditional grace.

He was willing to leave to God the mystery of sorting it all out in the end — and so am I. But we can, in gratitude commend Elam to that gracious, merciful God.

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? St. Paul asked:  will hardship, distress, persecution, nakedness, peril, sword.

And then he answered — confidently

No — in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am persuaded that nothing.

Not even death – can separate us form the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

This is the good news.

God loved Elam Davies while he lived.

God loves him now.  Thanks be to God.